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FM AMEMBASSY BELMOPAN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1712
WHA CENTRAL AMERICA COLLECTIVE
EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS BELMOPAN 000087

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN (CHRISTOPHER ASHE)

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: LOW VOTER TURNOUT AS BELIZEANS GO TO THE POLLS FOR
MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

¶1. Summary. Embassy observers visited the Belize City, Orange Walk, and Belmopan districts to observe the municipal elections today. These district elections were generally well-organized and calm, and media reports indicate the mood was similar throughout the country. Voter turnout has been extremely low countrywide. The presence of security forces was not consistent across all municipalities visited by Embassy observers. Minor violations involving campaigning within the restricted zones and the sale of alcohol by some businesses were reported in some districts. Low voter turnout may yield some surprise results in some of the districts. End Summary.

¶2. Many United Democratic Party (UDP) and People's United Party (PUP) supporters were cheering on their local candidates today during the municipal elections in a calm and quiet election atmosphere. Most municipalities were reflecting a bare-bones turnout through four p.m. Media projections estimate total voter turnout of 30% to 40%, far below the historical average of approximately 55% for municipal elections. While the general elections held in February 2008 and the last municipal elections in 2006 saw higher than average turnouts, reports as of four p.m. showed only an average 32% turnout across the nation. The highest voter turnout was reported in the Orange Walk municipality (47%) followed by Benque Viejo (41%) while turnout in the most heavily populated municipality, Belize City, remains extremely low at 26%.

¶3. Embassy observers visited the Belize City, Orange Walk, and Belmopan municipalities and generally found election officials well-organized and prepared. The presence of security forces at the polling stations was lower than expected in Orange Walk given the recent violence in the district during the sugarcane strike and security was well-staffed in the Belmopan and Belize City districts. Approximately twenty Belize Defense Force soldiers were observed in training for crowd control measures on a street not far from the polling stations in Orange Walk. Minor violations involving campaigning within restricted zones and the sale of alcohol by some businesses (prohibited on election day) were reported in the Corozal, San Ignacio, and San Pedro municipalities.

¶4. Polls close at six p.m. and vote counting will begin roughly two hours later. Elections officials have changed the counting procedure in an attempt to expedite the process. Ballot counting will now take place at each polling area, instead of transporting ballot boxes from each polling station to a centralized location, as has occurred in previous elections. This is expected to reduce the counting time by half and reduce ballot tampering.

¶5. Comment: Despite low turnout, the two principal political parties, the People's United Party (PUP) and United Democratic Party (UDP), had good representation outside the polling areas in all municipalities visited. In Belmopan, the Vision Inspired by the People (VIP) Party had only a modest crowd of supporters, despite a strong showing in the past municipal election. In Orange Walk, the atmosphere is comparable to the general elections. Orange Walk is the home of opposition leader, John Briceno, and considering the recent violence tied to the cane farmers strike, this municipal election is being hotly contested. Despite large groups of rival party supporters, polling stations remained peaceful.

¶6. The low voter turnout seen thus far in the elections suggests voters are experiencing 'election fatigue' and are showing disillusionment with both major political parties. Despite their

sweeping victory in the general elections, the UDP has failed to maintain a high approval rating due to a perceived failure to fulfill election promises, a worsening economy, and recent municipal government scandals. The low turnout may also yield some surprise results. End Comment.

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